

# Executive Summary

President Obama and congressional leaders have vowed to take action this year on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), most recently reauthorized and rebranded as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. While most observers remain skeptical that we'll actually see a signing ceremony in 2011, it does appear likely that at least one house of Congress will produce a bill.

In this “briefing book,” we identify the ten key issues that policymakers must resolve in order to get reauthorization across the finish line, and explore the major options under consideration for each one.

The ten issues—which fall under the areas of standards and assessments, accountability, teacher quality, and flexibility and innovation—are these:

## Standards and Assessments

1. **College and career readiness.** Should states be required to adopt academic standards tied to college and career readiness (such as the Common Core)?
2. **Cut scores.** What requirements, if any, should be placed upon states with respect to achievement standards (i.e., “cut scores”)?
3. **Growth measures.** Should states be required to develop assessments that enable measures of individual student growth?
4. **Science and history.** Must states develop standards and assessments in additional subjects beyond English language arts and math?

## Accountability

5. **School ratings.** Should Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) be maintained, tweaked, or scrapped?
6. **Interventions.** What requirements, if any, should be placed on states in terms of rewarding and sanctioning schools and turning around the lowest performers?

## Teacher Quality

7. **Teacher effectiveness.** Should Congress regulate teacher credentials (as with the current Highly Qualified Teachers mandate) and/or require the evaluation of teacher effectiveness?
8. **Comparability.** Should school districts be required to demonstrate comparability of services between Title I and non–Title I schools, and if so, may they point to a uniform salary schedule in order to do so?

## Flexibility and Innovation

9. **Flexibility.** Should the new ESEA provide greater flexibility to states and school districts to deviate from the law's requirements?
10. **Competitive grants.** Should reform-oriented competitive grant programs, including Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation, be authorized in the new ESEA?

For each of these questions, we offer our own recommendations. These suggestions are meant to point federal education policy in the direction of what we've termed "Reform Realism": a pro-school reform orientation leavened with realism about what the federal government can and cannot do well in K-12 education.

Reform Realism embodies these core principles:

- **"Tight-loose."** Current federal policy is loose about what students should know and be able to do but very tight about what happens when schools fall short. This equation should be flipped. There should be greater national clarity about expectations for student learning (à la the new Common Core state standards), and these should be linked to the real-world demands of college and employment; but there should be much greater flexibility in how states, communities, and schools get their students to meet these expectations.
- **Transparency in lieu of accountability.** Results-based accountability throughout the education system is vital, but it cannot be successfully imposed or enforced from Washington. Indeed, the No Child Left Behind experience has shown federal "accountability" in this realm to be a charade. The federal government can't force states and districts to turn around failing schools or offer students better options. What Uncle Sam can do is ensure that our education system's results and finances are transparent to the public, to parents, and to educators.
- **Incentives over mandates.** Whenever federal officials want to promote a particular reform—school turnarounds, teacher evaluations, school choice, etc.—they should encourage action by offering incentives (via competitive programs) instead of by imposing compliance mandates. The former is much more likely to result in positive change than the latter—and with fewer unintended consequences.

In the end, we propose a radical rethinking of the federal role in education. That role should be much more limited and focused than it is currently, and it should be tailored to Uncle Sam's capacity and expertise. More specifically, the federal government should do the following:

- Expect states to adopt rigorous standards and assessments and to maintain sophisticated data systems so that student achievement results and school-level finances are transparent to the public;
- Eliminate AYP and allow states much greater leeway in how they rate their schools;
- Allow states complete flexibility in deciding when and how to intervene in failing schools, determining the qualifications that teachers must meet, deciding whether to adopt teacher-evaluation systems, etc.; and
- Whenever possible, and with the exception of the main Title I program, turn reform-oriented formula grant programs into competitive ones.

Congress may not arrive at these same conclusions. But we do feel confident that the ten issues discussed here are those that it will debate in the weeks and months to come.